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Education for Rural People: What have we learned?

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Abstract

This article presents a synthesis of lessons learned since the launch of Education for Rural People (ERP) in 2002 under the leadership of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations as part of the implementation process for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The ERP program originated from the global consensus on the importance of education in reducing poverty and concern over the development challenges presented by approximately 880 million illiterate youth and adults and approximately 130 million out-of-school children, many of whom are rural and female. The most important products of ERP to date have been the knowledge generated and disseminated, innovations identified, and lessons learned by ERP partners related to policy and practice in areas such as education quality and access, gender responsive learning environments, parent and community engagement, and accommodation of non-traditional learners, to name just a few. Tools to strengthen national capacities to advance ERP have been developed. A global repository of the knowledge base on ERP has been established at FAO and is accessible worldwide via the Internet. Partnerships have been forged to expedite and facilitate implementation. ERP is now widely acknowledged as a top priority in the international education agenda. But educating all rural people is a huge challenge, and much is still to be done considering the number of out-of-school children living in rural areas. During this next phase, new investments will be needed at the national level. Preparing rural citizens to engage successfully in knowledge-based economies is central to the achievement of the MDGs.

Keywords: Education for rural people, food security, agriculture, sustainable rural livelihoods, education for all

Introduction

In the fall of 2003, the authors published a commentary in this journal entitled “Launching a New Flagship on Education for Rural People: An Initiative Agricultural and Extension Educators Can Get Behind” (Acker & Gasperini, 2003). The purpose of this follow-up article is to present a global synthesis of lessons learned since the launch of Education for Rural People (ERP) in 2002. This synthesis is based on a review of the rich literature base that has been spawned by the ERP initiative, including 33 books and conference proceedings, 57 virtual publications, 5 published articles, 8 newsletters, 3 theses and a sampling of the 287 books, 93 featured activities, and other resources listed in the toolkit on the ERP Web site.

Short (1985) argues that organizing and critiquing what we have learned from individual studies into a coherent synthesis document can be a useful preliminary step in identifying implications for action. In this synthesis article, we have drawn from experiences reported in the literature from around the world. The presentation is organized along the lines of the framework popularized by Stufflebeam (2007): Context, Input, Process and Product (CIPP).

Context

The ERP program originated from the global consensus on the importance of education in reducing poverty and the concern regarding the development challenges presented by approximately 880 million illiterate youth and adults and approximately 130 million out-of-school children, many of whom are rural and female. Education in this context is defined as including general education, training and extension.

ERP is a partnership launched in Johannesburg in 2002 at the World Summit for Sustainable Development. It is designed to contribute to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), especially:

MDG1: Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger;
MDG 2: Achieving universal primary education;
MDG 3: Promoting gender equity and empowering women; and
MDG 7: Ensuring environmental sustainability.

ERP builds on the 1996 World Food Summit Plan of Action, which stressed increased access to education for the poor and members of disadvantaged groups, including rural people, as a key to achieving poverty eradication, food security, durable peace and sustainable development. ERP is also one of the flagships of the global movement known as “Education for All,” which is committed to provide quality basic education for all children, youth and adults.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) provides the leadership for the ERP flagship through its ERP Coordinating Unit. FAO works in policy, knowledge management and advocacy with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), and with over 300 ERP partnership members, including donor agencies, national governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), the media and academia. Although building partnerships has been essential to expanding the impact beyond the lead agencies, the actual implementation of ERP policy is a national responsibility.

The vision that led to the focus on education for rural people is that people—not institutions or technology—are the driving force of development, as the United Nations Millennium Declaration indicates. The ERP vision is centered on peoples’ needs and is pursued through the promotion of interdisciplinary and inter-institutional collaboration between and among national institutions. Research on the role and impact of education in development has led to the conclusion that education is a neglected key to food security. In a recent research study,

Burchi and De Muro (2007) found that the correlation between food insecurity and primary education is very high although it decreases at other educational levels. Research addressing the link between education and agricultural income and productivity has a long tradition. For example, Carnoy (1992) analyzed 18 studies conducted for the World Bank that measured the relationship in low-income countries between farmers' education and their agricultural efficiency (as measured by crop production). The review concluded that [the] level of education of farmers was related to [the] level of their farm productivity, with 4 years of education contributing, on average, an 8.7 percent productivity gain over those with no formal education. (Acker & Gasperini, 2003, p. 85)

Education has emerged as “an essential prerequisite for reducing poverty, improving agriculture and living conditions of rural people and building a food secure world” (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006).

A prevailing development paradigm focuses on a rights-based approach whereby neglected minorities are often targeted with compensatory development strategies. FAO has stressed that rural people are a neglected majority and thus deserve greater assistance (Diouf, 2002). In fact, 70% of the world's poor live in rural areas, and this situation will not change drastically in the near term. Without improvements in education for rural people, there will be a drag on global efforts to reduce poverty and eliminate hunger.

There are two main challenges faced by rural people. The first challenge lies in the intertwined problems of poverty and hunger, which are addressed by MDG1. The problem of poverty and hunger in poor countries is still largely a rural issue given that the majorities of the world's poor live in rural areas and are dependent on agriculture (FAO, 2005).

The second challenge relates to education (MDG 2). The problem includes low access to and retention in education (especially for females) and high levels of illiteracy (typically two to three times higher in rural areas than urban areas). These challenges are compounded by low quality of education and lack of skills training through both school-based education and non-formal education and extension. On top of this, the rural–urban knowledge and education gap is widening. The fact that 82% of out-of-school children live in rural areas (UNESCO, 2005) where the highest rates of hunger exist led to the saying that children, youth and adults cannot learn on an empty stomach and empty minds cannot organize food secure systems. Without significant progress on MDG 1 success on MDG 2 is threatened and vice versa.

In Africa, the challenge is greater than in other regions. A new report from the British Department for International Development (2007) stated that more than \$11 billion is needed annually for education if Africa is to have any hope of getting all children into primary school by 2015. Nearly 80 million primary school-aged children remain out of school and over 57% of them are girls.

Inputs

FAO contributed the Coordinating Unit for ERP including the salaries and operating expenses of personnel and of projects. Other contributions came from ERP partners, interns and conference participants. Financial contributions and in-kind contributions came from international, national and local sources. Organizational and intellectual resources were invested in preparing and hosting regional conferences and other capacity-building events, conducting research and producing a variety of documents. Finally, Web site development has evolved as the dominant form of communication among members.

Process

The ERP process simultaneously addressed a number of mutually reinforcing activities. A research base was established. ERP started with an in-depth global study on education and rural development jointly conducted by FAO and UNESCO/International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP). This early step ensured that ERP would be developed according to a solid research base. An “ERP Series” has been publishing further research.

Partnerships were mobilized worldwide. The strong partnership between FAO and UNESCO/IIEP, The Association for the Development of Education in Africa and the Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture are examples of a membership that has grown to about 300 members including international organizations, governments, NGOs, the media and academia. ERP utilized these partnerships to promote the exchange of good practices. Five regional capacity-building workshops, the ERP Web site and the publication of the “ERP series” were some of the activities undertaken for this purpose. ERP also promoted knowledge generation, management and sharing including technical support to countries willing to address ERP objectives.

ERP promoted a holistic approach to serving the educational needs of rural people. Formal and non-formal education delivery modalities were addressed for all age groups. Extension, frequently marginalized by the rigidity of a single sector approach where formal and non-formal education are addressed as separate realities, benefited from the exchange of practices with other delivery modalities. Formal education policy makers and planners learned from agriculture and rural development staff involved in non-formal skills training and extension, and in vocational and higher agricultural education.

ERP worked simultaneously at the policy, capacity-building and grassroots levels. Both normative and pilot fieldwork

was undertaken, but with an emphasis on the policy level to ensure the greatest impact, cost effectiveness and a multiplier effect (Gasperini & Atchoarena, 2005). The Kosovo Ministries of Education, Science and Technology, and Agriculture, Forestry and Rural Development (Kosovo, 2004) “Strategy for Education for Rural People in Kosovo,” and the preparation of guidelines for planning ERP are examples of national level policy implementation.

Products

Although it is premature to assess impacts of ERP, it is possible to identify a range of intermediate or enabling products at this stage. The most important products to date have been the knowledge generated, innovations identified, and lessons learned by ERP partners related to policy and practice. At the policy level the partnership was able to affirm ERP as a key decision-making policy issue at the Fifth Meeting of High-Level Group on Education for All, held in Beijing, China, on 28–30 November 2005. The following is an illustrative set of innovations and lessons learned from ERP.

Access to Education

Access to education by all age groups in rural areas is considered by ERP practitioners to be the area requiring the greatest change. Senior level government representatives from 11 African countries reiterated the need “to address the gross inequalities that marginalize rural people, and in particular, access to education by girls and women, working children, people in inaccessible and remote areas, nomadic and pastoral communities, ethnic minorities, the disabled, refugees and displaced” persons (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006, p. 12). Removal or reduction of school fees, free access to learning materials and, to a lesser extent, school construction in rural areas has had a significant impact on school attendance since 1999. According to UNESCO (2007), from 1999 to 2004 primary school enrollments increased by

27% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 19% in South and West Asia.

Quality of Education

The quality of education available in rural areas lags behind that of urban areas. Yet, quality remains a critical foundational aspect of any advance in ERP. Although the quality of education for rural people has many dimensions, one critically important factor is the link between quality and relevance. Educational relevance is vital to increasing the appeal and utility of education for rural people. Contextualized learning allows students to study and solve real-life problems and to acquire life skills (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003).

Greater Flexibility and Local Autonomy

National policies that allow enough flexibility to permit some local content to be included in curricula are the foundation for community engagement in curriculum development. Systems that combine national curricular standards with some local content determined through community input processes have proven successful in several tests. In Thailand, for example, as much as 40% of the curriculum was permitted to be based on community and local needs (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2002). Other forms of flexibility play a role in increasing access to education. For example, academic schedules may need to be flexible to accommodate weather, cropping patterns and the movement of nomads.

Parent and Community Involvement

Participatory and community-based approaches have helped to increase educational access and to increase community ownership of schools (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006). Rural families need to see that the education their children receive is relevant. The development of parent-teacher organizations can have a significant impact on resources available to the school, as well as improved monitoring of quality, relevance and such critically

important supporting elements as school lunch programs.

Gender Responsive Learning Environments

To attract and retain primary school-aged female children some accommodations have proven successful. Flexible timetables to accommodate peak labor demand for children have helped to increase attendance in some schools. In situations where the schools are distant from the students' homes, well-supervised boarding facilities have been shown to be critical in safeguarding the well-being of female children and in inspiring confidence among parents. A very effective mechanism for improving participation rates and readiness to learn are the provision of school meals for all children and take-home rations for female children to compensate for the labor lost when they attend school (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006). Direct fund transfers to families, such as *Bolsa Escola* in Brazil, also demonstrated high returns.

Organizational and Institutional Efficiency

ERP must be approached systemically because no single institution is in the position to provide all of the necessary educational services. Coordination among providers such as extension, schools, non-governmental organizations and the private sector is essential for optimal efficiency. For example, trained agricultural extension agents who are already located in rural areas are a valuable potential resource for making presentations in their subject area at schools, for conducting adult education classes and for organizing farmer field schools that involve both technical and basic education outcomes. With the correct incentives teachers, if trained in the specific technical subjects, can support extension programs during off hours.

Accommodating Non-traditional Learners

Non-traditional learners may include out-of-school youth, including girls and women, retired child soldiers, nomads and

others. The variety of educational needs of these varied groups means that there is a need for multiple educational safety nets to ensure higher participation rates. Functional adult literacy and alternative basic education programs can respond to those who did not have the opportunity to pursue education earlier in life. These can be coordinated with extension in the form of learning in context.

Skills Training for Rural People

Historically, agricultural secondary and postsecondary education and training have had a sharp focus on preparation for on-farm employment and public sector jobs (Avila, Atchoarena, & Gasperini, 2005). Skills training for success in rural areas must include a variety of skills such as life skills, food production skills and self-employment skills. Appropriate non-formal skills training for adults and school drop-outs can permit rural people to diversify their skills for a more secure livelihood and greater resiliency during times of stress (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006). Innovative models have been developed in Lao PDR, where production-based vocational schools combine learning, earning and doing (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2002). Another example is the Junior Farmer Field and Life Schools in Mozambique that address agricultural, as well as life skills development, among young rural citizens (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006).

Teachers and Extension Staff Issues

Recruitment and retention of rural teachers and extension staff present significant challenges. One innovation identified by ERP partners is the reform of recruitment practices by attracting prospective teachers and extension workers who are originally from rural areas. Another area identified as ripe for change is the deployment policies that can be adjusted to make rural areas more attractive through bonuses, higher salaries relative to other government employees in rural areas (a step taken by China), loan forgiveness, provision

of subsidized housing, access to better health care, posting newly qualified teachers/extension workers in pairs, establishment of career progression options and other similar policies. In Malaysia, for example, a package of incentives including a piece of land and training in agriculture was used to encourage teachers to stay in rural areas. In Lao PDR, profit sharing in school-based income-generating activities is allowed whereby both students and teachers benefit financially (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2002).

Infrastructure

School facilities represent a significant public investment in rural areas. Better utilization of limited school infrastructure can be achieved through such ideas as double shift classes and/or utilization for after-hours adult education. Feeder or satellite schools can accommodate the youngest children in remote areas until they are strong enough to walk longer distances to a full primary school. The creative use of information and computer technology (ICT) is frequently promoted as a method for increasing access and efficiency in education in rural settings for application in both formal and non-formal programs. While ICT has already had an impact in some areas a cautionary note has been raised. As noted at the ERP workshop in Bangkok, "it is far from a foregone conclusion that ICT will increase access to quality education for the poor and other disadvantaged groups" (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2002, p. 92).

Effective Pro-rural Policies

National level policies and strategies that effectively address ERP recognize the diversity of needs of rural people such as agro-ecological differences, geographical differences, and socio-economic and cultural differences (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006). However, motivating major changes in policy and resource allocation to favor rural citizens is generally very difficult to achieve

due to the absence of powerful political forces that advocate for rural people.

Donor Issues

National governments are finding it quite challenging to build effective ERP programs in the face of decreasing donor investment in education, training and rural development (Gasperini & Maguire, 2002). Events that remind donors of the importance of investing in the educational aspects of agriculture and rural development are needed. Donor coordination at the national level can be improved by agreeing on an overall vision, by coordinating separate funding streams and through regular monitoring and dialog. Finally, leadership from regional and international granting and lending organizations will be essential for those countries committed to elevating the education levels of their rural citizens. Gasperini and Maguire suggested that the donor community and developing countries could orchestrate their efforts for an all out assault on rural poverty. Donor investments in education can help to optimize performance of investments in other sectors in the development process.

Role of Higher Agricultural Education

Higher Agricultural Education has a role to play. The engaged university is one that seeks out opportunities to work directly with communities. In so doing, the community and the university are both strengthened. Universities can play a key role in training teachers and extension staff, assisting with the development of curriculum, and helping with monitoring and evaluation of educational rural programs (FAO/UNESCO/IIEP, 2006).

Conclusions

During the first five years of ERP, FAO had the lead role in advancing the ERP flagship and was ably supported by UNESCO. During this phase the focus was on developing policy options and documenting and sharing innovative ideas

and best practices. Progress has been made and ERP is now commonly discussed at national and international policy forums. Tools to strengthen national capacities to advance ERP have been developed. A global repository of the knowledge base on ERP has been established at FAO and is accessible worldwide via the Internet. Partnerships have been forged to expedite and facilitate implementation.

But educating all rural people is a huge challenge, and much is still to be done considering the number of out-of-school children living in rural areas. Although the policy discourse is more or less complete for the present, it is now appropriate to shift to a phase whereby resources must focus on implementation at the national level. During this next phase, new investments will be needed at the national level. FAO, as a knowledge-based organization, will continue to collect, analyze, interpret and disseminate the knowledge required for the world to meet the food and nutrition needs of all its citizens and to provide global governance “with respect to . . . the improvement of education and administration relating to nutrition, food and agriculture and the spread of public knowledge of nutritional and agricultural science and practice” (FAO, 1945, Article 1). UNESCO is uniquely suited for facilitating ERP implementation at the national level given that this role lies within its mandate to support the advancement of education at such a level. National Education for All plans, the Fast Track initiative, Poverty Reduction Strategies and National Rural Development Plans as well as the One UN initiative can yield significant results as the lessons from the ERP first phase are implemented. UNESCO’s leadership and technical support to ERP at the country level during this next phase would need to be strengthened, and FAO is in a good position to contribute as a supporting entity to the work of UNESCO in the specific areas of FAO’s expertise.

At the national level, the hallmark of the ERP implementation will be a systemic

needs-based approach that fosters education (including extension) by expanding access and improving quality for all children, youth and adults. This can be done only by strengthening multi-sectoral and interdisciplinary institutional linkages and developing new alliances between ministries of agriculture and ministries of education as well as with civil society. Preparing rural citizens to engage in knowledge-based economies that are being buffeted by the forces of globalization is a challenge no single entity can address alone. National people-centered and rights-/justice-oriented strategies and sustainable rural livelihoods approaches will greatly benefit from such new alliances.

At the international level, ERP needs to become a commitment of all UN agencies and plans, bilateral donors, NGOs and others. At the national level, attention needs to be paid to the fact that there is an unequivocal association between primary education for rural people and food security. ERP is a complement to rather than a substitute for food security, poverty alleviation and sustainable natural resources management programs as well as for Education for All programs, and could be combined with such programs to increase efficiency.

The need to move from a traditional agricultural education paradigm to one of education for sustainable rural development designed for strengthening rural communities has been acknowledged during this decade (Atchoarena & Gasperini, 2003). The traditional agricultural education paradigm can benefit from a continuous redefinition that builds on the work of Crowder, Lindley, Bruening and Doron (1999) reflecting changes that have taken place in rural areas including changes in technology, global supply chains, health interventions, on- and off-farm employment and global environmental changes.

Education for rural people is not a headline-grabbing story such as a research breakthrough in crops research, in climate

change or in avian influenza. It is not flashy. But it is a critical foundation activity that must be addressed in order to ensure the achievement of several MDGs, especially, MDG 1, MDG 2, MDG 3 and MDG 7. Every day, more children are born. Every year, a new class of students is ready to enter school and the opportunity for these students to do so will mark the difference between them becoming a new generation of illiterate citizens and farmers or a new generation of economically productive rural-based citizens capable of making informed decisions to enhance their lives and those of their fellow community members. It is a process as relentless as it is critical to each society to manage and preserve the planet's natural and human resource base. It is an area in which the UN system needs to take dynamic action on behalf of its poorest members and where national governments need to invest.

The CIPP evaluation model checklist published by Stufflebeam (2007) seeks to assist evaluators in assessing "long-term sustainable improvements" in programs. In the case of ERP, the questions that Stufflebeam poses are those that ultimately will be asked to determine if the ERP flagship succeeded: "Were the right beneficiaries reached? Were their needs met? Were the gains for the beneficiaries sustained? Did the processes that produced the gains prove transportable and adaptable for effective use in other settings?" (Stufflebeam, 2007, p. 1). National policies and corresponding national, regional and international investments should factor these questions into programs designed to educate rural people.

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